

*DOS MUJERES EN PRAGA: THE ORPHANED CHILD OF JUAN  
JOSÉ MILLÁS*

PATRICIA REAGAN  
University of Virginia

In his 2002 novel, *Dos mujeres en Praga* Juan José Millás creates a crisis of identity for the majority of his protagonists by exploring the ways in which they are orphaned or have orphaned others in their lives. But, in point of fact, not one of them is without parents, nor have any of them given up their own children. And so, the classic definition of orphan as that of a person or child whose parents are absent does not apply.

Millás' novel, the central conflict of which is the ways in which we are adopted and orphaned or adopt and orphan others, needs a new concept of orphanhood —that of the auto-orphan, a state of self-inflicted abandonment, which emerges as a result of a variety of crises of identity experienced by the characters of the novel.

As Luz Acaso, nears her death, she seeks an author, Álvaro Abril, to undertake the project of writing her life. In the course of several meetings with Abril she adopts different fictional identities for herself, each of which present paths she did not actually choose in life. Consequently, the «truth» of her identity is never fully known, as it is hidden in a well-developed web of lies including a feigned widowhood and more importantly, a claim that as a teenager she gave a baby up for adoption. Despite the fact that she admits to being a liar, Álvaro's sense of disconnection from others leads him to believe that he himself was adopted as a child, and over time, that Luz is in fact his birth mother. Through these encounters and others, the sense of

loneliness and isolation that the characters experience, create a fertile ground for the seeds of auto-orphanhood to take root.

The notion of adoption/orphanhood develops into a unique multi-layered metaphor, treated directly through plots and subplots, as it becomes a central theme of the interviews between Álvaro and Luz, and for each of them in their personal lives. The novel also contains an intercalated story, a letter from Álvaro to his mother, and a non-fiction research report, all of which deal with adoption as well. The unnamed narrator of *Dos mujeres en Praga* is a professional non-fiction writer whose role it is to piece the different fragments and stories together to «write» the novel and create a coherent story from the fragments of Luz's life. Álvaro, Luz and the narrator all inflict upon themselves a state of auto-orphanhood as they disassociate from a real yet incomplete identity and begin the construction of a new identity, as an orphan. Even as the characters take on their new state of auto-orphanhood, the narrator discovers on a metafictional level that the act of writing leads to an «orphanhood» of the work from its author. Writing is a birth process and after laboring over the novel, the text is ripped from the author, and given to the reader who adopts the text as his or her own.

The complexity of *Dos mujeres en Praga* can be understood more completely through an analysis of the various layers of the adoption/orphanhood metaphor. Despite the novel's publication in 2002 it has received little critical attention. My analysis engages in a close reading of the novel, informed more generally by an understanding of adoption in literature as well as other fiction by Juan José Millás. One of few published pieces on the novel, Joanne Lucena's short conference paper, «*Dos mujeres en Praga*: alegoría del proceso de escritura,» demonstrates the way in which the various modes of self-referential writing come together to question the limits between fiction and reality in the novel. As one element of her analysis of metafiction, Lucena shows how the narrator links authorship to parenthood as an example of metafiction in the text. Lucena cites the passage in the novel, «del mismo modo que hay padres adoptivos más legítimos que los verdaderos, hay autores que no se merecen los libros que han escrito. Es muy difícil ser padre, o ser autor» (Millás 130), concluding that, «Esta metáfora se puede relacionar directamente con la de los procesos de escribir, que forma parte del elemento metafictivo del texto al indicar la futilidad de buscar una paternidad, un origen que ancle el contenido y el significado» (138). Clearly, as Lucena's anal-

ysis reveals, the connection between authorship and parenthood contributes to the novel's allegory of the writing process. While her argument is a starting point, my analysis establishes that this connection is not simply an example of the writing process but rather the driving force of the entire novel. To demonstrate this, I will first look briefly at adoption in literature and in contemporary psychological and sociological studies. Then, I will use general criticism of Millás' earlier fiction to demonstrate how *Dos mujeres en Praga* fits into his broader critical preoccupations. By using Tzvetan Todorov's and Jacques Derrida's theories of absence as a critical basis for my textual analysis of the adoption/orphanhood metaphor, I will explore at this point the novel's three main characters, Álvaro, Luz and the narrator to show how each character formulates a conceptualization of their own identity based on his or her own auto-orphanhood. Finally, I will explore the role of the narrator and author in the metafictional level of the text.

Adoption is not a new subject matter in literature. Marianne Novy's study *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* contains a wide range of essays dealing with literary works in which adoption plays a significant role. In her introduction, Novy discusses mythical cases of adoption such as *Oedipus*, later examples such as *Silas Marner* and *Great Expectations*, as well as more contemporary examples such as *Pigs in Heaven*. She asserts that adoption has figured heavily in literature because «adoption plots dramatize cultural tension about definitions of family and the importance of heredity» (2). As Novy shows, adoption literature often focuses on the identity construction of isolated characters<sup>1</sup>. Outside of literature, adoption studies have only recently gained momentum. Adam Pertman's *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming America*, argues that the silence in society concerning adoption often contributes to feelings of insecurity amongst the adopted. «Adoption has been considered off-limits for so long, both by individuals and society as a whole, that until very recently studies have not

<sup>1</sup> As Novy indicates, this sense of isolation can be attributed to a lack of community amongst the adopted or their adoptive parents. As a result, the feeling of isolation is not limited to a fragmented identity but is extended to include social isolation. Novy writes: Unlike many minority groups, neither adoptees nor adoptive parents necessarily grow up among, raise children with, or wish to socialize with others in their category... Because their relation to adoption has been associated with loss and even with stigma, adoptees and adoptive and birth parents have generally been, for the most part, isolated and fragmented. (5)

been devised, census questions have not been asked, surveys have not been conducted. There is no national organization or branch of government that keeps track of adoptions» (7)<sup>2</sup>. Pertman further makes the case that both adoptive parents and legislation encourage silent acceptance by adopted individuals.

John Triseliotis, in one of few early adoption studies, interviewed a small group of highly conflicted individuals who revealed a relatively high level of unhappiness. The participants «Attributed their general unhappiness to dissatisfaction, to poor family relationships, lack of close links with their parents and a failure to develop a sense of attachment and belonging» (77). More specifically, several individuals talked of experiencing a sense of 'emptiness', 'isolation' or 'vacuum'; of feeling 'false', 'not being a whole or real person', 'depressed and unhappy', 'tense and anxious', 'not coping', 'unable to get close to people', among other feelings. (Triseliotis 82). In summary, the adopted individual feels isolated, disconnected and incomplete.

The lack of identity and community, difficulty in uncovering one's true self and general sense of unhappiness in cases of real adoption/orphanhood relate directly to the auto-orphanhood that characterizes *Dos mujeres en Praga*. As Branka Kalenic Ramsak indicates, Millás' novel «se trata de la ausencia de amor o del eterno anhelo inalcanzable que deja a los protagonistas inseguros, solitarios, angustiados de su existencia cotidiana» (135). This lack of love and the definitive feelings of anguish provoke the protagonists to self inflict a state of auto-orphanhood. Similarly, Freud's theory of the family romance considers this concept that I have named auto-orphanhood:

There are only too many occasions on which a child is slighted, or at least *feels* he has been slighted, on which he feels he is not receiving the whole of his parents' love, and, most of all, on which he feels regrets at having to share it with brothers and sisters. His sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds a vent in the idea, often consciously recollected later from early childhood, of being a step-child or an adopted child. (237-38)

<sup>2</sup> This trend has now changed dramatically since Pertman's 2000 study. Support groups and social groups for adoptive parents and for their children are now quite prevalent. Special groups for adopting families are also gaining popularity such as support groups for parents of children adopted from specific regions. For example, Richmond, VA has at least 4 groups: Adoptive Families Del Sol (families who have adopted from Latin America), Coordinators 2 (Birth parent & adoptee support), Families of the China Moon (families who have adopted from China), and Families for Russian/Ukrainian Adoption of Central VA.

Basing her ideas on the Freudian concept, Novy concludes, as well, that «for most people —nonadopted people— the fantasy of discovering that they were adopted and can be reunited with a different family elsewhere is a way of dealing with negative feelings about their parents» (2). The adopted person has the ability not only to construct an image of the person he or she wants to be, starting from his or her origin, but also the right to change that image, which is why the adoption fantasy works so well for the novel's characters<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, the adopted individual can create and manipulate his or her identity in the same way that a novel is a created and manipulated fictional construction. The adoption/orphanhood metaphor in *Dos mujeres en Praga* demonstrates both levels.

Criticism of Millás' prior work focuses on his preoccupation with identity construction. Dale F. Knickerbocker concludes, «Cada acercamiento millasiano al concepto de la identidad es un experimento distinto, cuya meta es indagar las posibilidades aparentemente inagotables que ofrece» («Identidad» 561). Millás' various identity experiments all share the same basic starting point: «La identidad implica siempre un enfrentamiento con la realidad circundante, a partir del cual un personaje, conscientemente o no, construye, adopta o halla un otro-yo» (Knickerbocker «Identidad» 561). Knickerbocker's article prefigures Millás' new experiment in self-discovery with the phrase «adopta ...un otro-yo», and applies directly to *Dos mujeres en Praga* as well when he states: «Millasian characters fear, dislike and shun human contact, do not feel part of any collective, and are generally considered by others (including the readers) to be eccentrics» (Knickerbocker *Obsessive* 18). Thus, *Dos mujeres en Praga* can be considered a new Millás experiment in the search for identity, completely in keeping with his previous fiction.

Indeed, two other critics have also used the word orphan to describe Millás' protagonists. Miguel Catalán concludes: «El sentimiento que se cuela por los escasos resquicios de la fascinadora mirada

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<sup>3</sup> One of the essays in Novy's book is by Nancy Gish who analyzes the Scottish poet, Jackie Kay. Gish demonstrates that Kay, as an adopted person constructs and modifies her image at will as Freud demonstrates is the advantage to the adoption fantasy. For Gish, Kay's work gains importance and complexity through her changeable sense of identity. «The possibilities for the adopted person to constantly re-invent themselves are endless. To study Kay's work is to explore relations of adoption, identity, language and voice... The 'I' who speaks may be neither the lyric 'I' of the author speaking as a traditional unitary self nor the dramatic 'I' of the author's fictional constructions. Rather, it may be both self and other, a voicing of internal multiplicity. (180)

ajena de Millás es siempre un sentimiento de orfandad, de separación injustificada del resto del mundo, y, principalmente, de los familiares más próximos» (3). Thus, Catalán associates alienation with orphanhood, in Millás' fiction. In addition, Pepa Anastasio applies Catalán's conclusion to her discussion of Millás' *El orden alfabético*, associating the protagonist's feelings of anguish described as orphanhood with Millás's negative worldview. She says, «El sentimiento de orfandad del protagonista puede entenderse en el contexto de la negación de Dios por la razón» (196)<sup>4</sup>. For both Catalán and Anastasio, to be or to feel like an orphan in Millás' fiction is not simply to be parentless, but rather to be wracked with an existential angst. Moreover, Knickerbocker concludes that each of the five novels preceding *Dos mujeres en Praga* have protagonists who suffer the same feelings of alienation. He determines: «The representation of identity in each of these works treated here may be seen as different linguistic, aesthetic experiments with others, alter egos, each pair of which constitutes a metaphor of the inherently split, self-alienated subject itself» (*Obsessive* 24). It follows that the «self-alienated» subject to which Knickerbocker refers is fundamentally equivalent to the self-inflicted auto-orphanhood in *Dos mujeres en Praga*. In this way, Millás' protagonists *auto-orphan* or *self-alienate* in order to be able to *un-identify* themselves from their origins. In order to reconstruct a different identity each character must be reborn as part of the process of recreating his or her new self-determined identity, which always necessarily ends up being one of isolation or absence, but in point of fact, disassociation leads to self-(de)-actualization<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Citing the quote from Catalán, Pepa Anastasio discusses the difference between the disassociated adult and the secure child who still feels connected with his origin (195). She cites an example from *El orden alfabético*, in which young Julio, confronted with his grandfather's death, begins to fear losing his father before arriving at «una edad en la que no le necesitaría: siempre me ha dado miedo la orfandad» (28). As we see in *El orden alfabético*, in Julio's imaginary world the loss of words and communication leads to the dehumanization and animalization of man. This loss of language results in an uncertain identity for Julio and an existential orphanhood, because of the lack of reason.

<sup>5</sup> Millás himself discusses his conceptualization of identity construction in an interview with Katarzyna Olga Beilin. He believes that it is common for young people (*jóvenes*) to question their individuality and whether it is possible to have «una identidad propia o si es posible aceptar como propia la que se ha heredado o la que se ha imitado» (123). This is exemplified in «Primavera de luto» in the collection of the same name published in 1989. The protagonist in the story, Elena, begins to search for her own identity after her husband's death. Upon cutting her hair she feels as if she has witnessed her rebirth, but at the same time she realizes that to be valid her change

Millás' writing of orphanhood in *Dos mujeres en Praga* is propelled by the same sense of absence felt by the process of identity construction. Todorov's analysis of Henry James' short fiction reveals a similar phenomenon in his analysis of James. He writes, «James' tales are based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause... Everything in the story owes its presence, in the last analysis, to it. But it is absent and we set off in quest of it» (75). The same can be said of adoption/orphanhood in *Dos mujeres en Praga*. The protagonists feel the force of absence, resulting in a self-imposition of orphanhood. Todorov also discusses James' view of the author in his work, which parallels the metafictional level of the metaphor in Millás' novel<sup>6</sup>. For James, «The author's life is only an appearance, a contingency, an accident; it is an inessential presence. The work of art is the truth to be sought after, even if there is no hope of finding it» (94). Thus, for James, the work of art stands alone. Millás' novel, as it is orphaned from its author is just that, a separate, stand-alone work of art. The novel's parent, the author, makes only a brief «appearance».

In the novel, then, the sense of a lack of origin and of absence leads the characters to try to re-create their identities after auto-orphaning themselves. Through this process of self-alienation each character discovers a hole in himself or herself, what Derrida calls the lack of center, which he defines as «a presence —*eidos*, *arché*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia*, *aletheia*» ('form, origin, purpose, energy, being, truth') (879). Derrida identifies that a rupture of this presence has occurred, leaving man center-less as a result of «the totality of an era» (880). Thus, the orphanhood of modern man can be seen as a self-inflicted sense of loss. Orphanhood describes the disease while presenting auto-orphanhood as the proposed cure. The textual center, the motivating force of the novel is the lack of a core, manifested in the individual dilemmas of Álvaro and Luz, and the creation of the narrator propelled by the necessity to create as a response to existential angst and lack of origin, a feeling shared by the novel's protagonists.

I would like to look carefully now at the three protagonists of *Dos mujeres en Praga* —Álvaro, Luz and the narrator. The first reference to orphanhood in the text is in Álvaro's phone conversation with a

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must be more than superficial. As Knickerbocker concludes: «Elena tiene que desprenderse de todo lo que le recuerde al pasado; sobre todo en cuanto a relaciones familiares o sentimentales» («Identidad» 568).

<sup>6</sup> Todorov demonstrates the way in which James reverses the traditional view of psychological criticism that the author is actually the absent cause of the text.

prostitute, whom he has called after reading her ad of herself as a «viuda madura» (37). In the course of the conversation she asks if he is alone: «¿Como un viudo?» to which he answers «Como un huérfano» (38). The prostitute seems to understand Álvaro's feeling of isolation: «Pues una viuda y un huérfano tienen muchas cosas en común» (38). The prostitute's offhand remark becomes a strand enmeshing Luz and Álvaro. Indeed, Luz had claimed in her first meeting with Álvaro to be a widow, although she reveals later that she is not. As Álvaro elaborates the orphan/widow feeling by describing his own insecurity, he adopts his own alienation.

Although he is not an orphan of happenstance, Álvaro demonstrates traits of an orphan, revealing an obsession with the ghosts of his past. The narrator connects Álvaro's specters with literature: «Sabía por sus lecturas literarias que estamos condenados a tropezar con aquello de lo que huimos y comenzaba a sospechar que los fantasmas eran seres reales» (40). Tying these loose threads together, the narrator calls attention to the fact that lack and centerlessness are spun out in different ways in literature. When the prostitute arrives, Álvaro realizes: «sin duda era el fantasma que él mismo había reclamado por teléfono unos minutos antes: era su madre muerta» (41). Thus, the prostitute momentarily converts his absence into a live presence. Subsequently, Álvaro reveals his desire to watch the prostitute bathe herself and he explains that as a child he used to watch his mother bathe from the dirty clothesbasket. At the end of the chaste encounter with the prostitute, a confession is wrung from both parties. She is no more a widow than he is an orphan. Yet, his auto-orphanhood is a way to free himself from the psychological torment he feels for having desired his mother as a child. In order to reconstruct a satisfactory self-identity Álvaro releases himself from his past and from his Oedipal guilt. This unfolds later in a phone conversation with the narrator. He reports that he has always had the suspicion that he was adopted based on overhearing his mother state, «Estoy arrepentida, ahora no volvería a hacerlo» (113) on the phone. The narrator tries to convince Álvaro of the inconclusiveness of the sentence, although Álvaro is unswayed. The significance of the event with the prostitute is revealed later in the novel, although it is this incipient event that weaves the weft of Álvaro's life into the warp of Luz's. The scene establishes Álvaro's obsession with his disconnected self, even as he begins to believe his own lies.

In Álvaro's ensuing interview with Luz, during which she confess-



es that she is not a widow but rather that she gave a child up for adoption when she was fifteen, he finds confirmation of his feeling of loss. While we have seen that in Millás' fiction, identity can be re-shaped when ties are cut with the past we must consider how this should be interpreted in terms of *Dos mujeres en Praga*. The key lies in the fact that Luz neither gave a child up for adoption nor was Álvaro really adopted. Luz is making up for a life never lived while Álvaro is rejecting the ties to his actual family. The two have found the adoption/orphanhood metaphor as a way to describe their desired absence. In order to rebuild an identity different from their own, they must first stitch together a story of adoption/orphanhood in order to have a familial tie from which to dissociate. Both Álvaro and Luz are in a self-inflicted state of bereavement. Álvaro longs for his «birth» mother (who never existed) and Luz yearns for her lost child (whom she never bore).

As these fictions develop during Luz's life-story interviews, the narrator is simultaneously developing a report based on «real» adoption cases. This report provides a non-fictional level in contrast with Álvaro's false-biography writing, which serves to blur the line between truth/lies, non-fiction/fiction. The narrator's real report is seen to have an effect on the false claims of Luz. Indeed, it is his report that Luz hears from her car stereo and which provokes the confession that she gave her child up for adoption, subsequently leading Álvaro to the improbable conclusion that he could be Luz's son. Luz's lies combined with Álvaro's real encounter with a prostitute compound Álvaro's self-inflicted orphanhood. Fact and fiction are both juxtaposed and superimposed beyond distinction while truth and lies are both shown to be catalysts of the other. María José, Luz's roommate (and the other of the «dos mujeres» in the novel) contributes to this juxtaposition by calling Álvaro and pretending to be a nun at the hospital where María Luz de Acaso gave him up for adoption. Her lie is yet another untruth disguised as truth, which affects the narrator, prompting him to go to the clinic to investigate María José's claim. Just as the author's report of real adoption fuels Luz's lies, María José's lie affects the narrator's real investigation. The narrator finds himself so swept up in the fantasy that in spite of his skepticism towards that which Álvaro's asserts, he is compelled to abandon his «real» report to study auto-orphans. He admits, «Ahora solo me interesaban los falsos adoptados» (140). He is drawn to validate fantasy with reality and vice versa.

Luz's meetings with Álvaro follow a continuing pattern of claims and retractions. In her admission of her deceit she says, «Me impresionó tanto que hice mío el problema de esas pobres mujeres a las que les arrebataron el bebé nada más nacer. Pero se trataba de una mentira que no era una mentira, porque mientras la contaba era verdad. ¿Puede usted entender esto, que una cosa sea al mismo tiempo mentira y verdad?» (69-70). In justifying her lies she describes real feelings. By claiming to have lost a baby to adoption, her lack will be better understood in her biography. Even after Luz confesses, Álvaro maintains his own lie that he is Luz's son, indicating that he does understand how a lie can sometimes be true. Luz betrays her awareness of her deceitful personality when she promises to tell Álvaro the truth in their final interview. However, at this point in the novel, we recognize that the concept of truth has been completely deconstructed and has in fact become meaningless. Luz's confessions remain questionable, when she admits in her final interview that she is a prostitute and that the various lies she has told Álvaro constitute the lives of others. Furthermore, she claims to have maintained a long relationship with a married man who had given his child up for adoption. Thus, Luz's declarations, whether true or not, are based on fact, which makes her self-determined identity only partially fiction.

In this way, Luz's fictions relate to the task of the novelist in that her comment. «mientras la contaba era verdad» (70) parallels the relationship of the author with his text. Through the novel's multi-tiered structure, in which Millás writes a novel about a narrator telling the story of a writer constructing another's identity in a false biography, it is revealed that the absolute truth is irrelevant in fiction. The writer (author, narrator, and biographer) constructs identities in the same way that the novel's characters reconstruct identities —as fictions grounded in truth. In other words, if the reader can understand Luz's angst by means of her false assertion at having orphaned a child, then the «truth» of her life becomes irrelevant within that fiction. Furthermore, a novel's characters are always orphaned from a true origin (before the text) or a future one (beyond the text). The task of the reader is to construct origins for the novel's characters, in a sense, to read a novel is to adopt a child. The adoptive parents (readers) know only what the child (novel) chooses to tell them. Thus, the adoption/orphanhood metaphor can bring the attentive reader to question individual character's lives within fiction, the author's relationship with his or her fiction, and the role of the read-

er's perspective when approaching the text<sup>7</sup>. In this way, the inaccessibility of absolute truth is affirmed.

In comparison to what seems to be the narrator's real investigations, Luz's false biography (not included in the novel) will appear to be more fictional than the novel that contains it, although both are equally constructed (un)truths. The struggling narrator can only write the novel that we read by combining bits and pieces of fictional and non-fictional accounts including Luz's biography interviews, Álvaro's obsessions and the *novela zurda* that María José is trying to write. Yet, all of the pieces constitute a unity within the fiction of the novel. *Dos mujeres en Praga*, is not seamless, indeed, the art of the novel lies in its outward demonstration of the interwoven processes of spinning truth into fiction. The novel gives the reader the sensation that he or she is undergoes the same thought processes as those of the author while writing a novel. Yet, the novel is still separated from Millás, and his intentions in writing are not as important as those of the reader of his estranged novel.

Just as *Dos mujeres en Praga* constructs both a multi-layered and fragmented novel in which the various narrative threads intertwine, the narrator demonstrates that reality is sometimes ordered through coincidences, recognizing this as the basis of his own writing: «Quizá el mundo se sostiene sobre una red invisible de casualidades. Si un fragmento de esa red queda al descubierto ante tus ojos, cómo evitar la tentación de tirar el hilo» (63). Thus, he shows that borne out of coincidences is the possibility to make sense of the world and create order. Out of the random acts of happenstance Luz and Álvaro are able to order their lives. Even the narrator is drawn in after Luz (Fina to the narrator) chooses him to be Álvaro's fictional father. We

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<sup>7</sup> Oftentimes, the reader searches for the origin of an author's work, by comparing new fiction to earlier examples of novels by the same author. For example, Knickerbocker demonstrates that Millás's «El pequeño cadáver de R.J.», also from the collection *Primavera de luto*, plays with the idea of author, narrator, identity and ownership of text. In «El pequeño cadáver de R.J.», R.J. publishes, with permission, a text originally written by the narrator. Later, the two switch papers in a conference leading to the success of R.J. and to the demise of the narrator. Knickerbocker compares their relationship to that of Cain and Abel. In the story, the narrator is ultimately destroyed by his other, R.J. («Identidad» 564). R.J. represents the text itself that becomes a living being, existing beyond the reaches of its narrator or author. It is also an intertextual reference to Roland Barthes's, «The Death of the Author» (Knickerbocker «Identidad» 564). In this way we see that Millás demonstrates a consistent questioning of the role of the narrator and author. The origins of *Dos mujeres en Praga* can be found in earlier works written by Millás.

also see this need to create order at a book signing, when a boy reveals that his father looks uncannily like the narrator, so much so that he comes to call the narrator «stepbrother». This encounter provokes the narrator to think: «Supongamos, me dije, que ese hombre y yo fuéramos realmente hermanos gemelos y que nuestros padres nos hubieran separado al entregarnos en adopción a dos familias distintas» (78). He even imagines that reuniting with his long-lost twin brother would explain «esa sensación de estar inacabado, inconcluso, que me ha acompañado a lo largo de la vida» (78). The narrator finds comfort in his auto-orphanhood, a way to understand his sense of incompleteness in life. The narrator is able to direct his lack in a productive way—he uses the experience as a motivation to begin a report on adoption, and eventually to «write» the novel. Before writing he goes to observe his «brother» from a distance and is able to understand how others perceive him.

Another example of the adoption/orphanhood metaphor that draws attention to the importance of coincidences, is the short story intercalated within the novel, entitled *Nadie*<sup>8</sup>. The narrator writes this story for the newspaper in the midst of his adoption research. In the story, Luisa contacts Luis Rodó by phone stating, «Soy Luisa, la hija de Antonia» (81). This conversation brings back the memory of Antonia, Luis's lover from twenty years ago and the possibility that Luisa might be his child. Luis realizes that Luisa could give meaning to his mediocre life: «Llevaba años esperando aquella llamada, sufriendo anticipadamente por ella...» (83). But, after meeting Luisa and going to her apartment, which in another incident of chance Luis discovers to be the same apartment where his romantic encounters with Antonia took place, Luisa reveals that he is not her father. Sex ensues, leaving Luis with the same empty feeling he suffered with Antonia, only now he becomes obsessed with the possibility that he left Luisa pregnant with his child. Thus, his circle of lack continues, and twenty years later Luis shows himself to be incapable of learning from the past. When his wife asks with whom he had lunch, he responds «nadie», demonstrating the insignificance of the impossible un-lived other life, and generating the title of the story.

The intertwining coincidences of the plots of the short story and the novel become even more complicated. Luisa of *Nadie* has a problem

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<sup>8</sup> Although it is customary to put the titles of short stories in quotation marks, in *Dos mujeres en Praga* the title, *Nadie* is italicized. I have chosen to do the same.

with her left eye, just as María José does. The narrator also admits to the reader that a portion of *Nadie* is autobiographical, an adulterous relationship and the loss of a child, continuing to blur the line separating fiction and reality. At the same time, the narrator has a «real» daughter, although he is not entirely convinced that she is his. He has an argument with his ex-wife in which he yells: «Sé perfectamente lo que hago porque es mi hija» (99). Her response is, «¿Estás seguro?» (99), which she later tries to pass off as a joke. He suggests that the possibility of his daughter having a «real» father could explain his estranged relationship with her. Finally, the narrator admits that he desires the uncertainty of the false life over the realities of his current life: «Cómo me gustaría ahora que todo fuera cierto: que yo fuera adoptado y que hubiera tenido un hijo con aquella mujer de la que no he vuelto a tener noticias en todos estos años» (100). In this way, we see that his own dissatisfaction with his real life (adultery, unknown children, bad relationships with his real children, general angst, his family relationships, etc.) causes his self-imposed auto-orphanhood, which he is in a better position himself to understand through Álvaro's and Luz's stories. At the same time, *Nadie* and the novel as a whole question the everyday chance that constitutes reality. Fiction is shown to intermingle with the possibilities of our unlived lives, when the narrator proclaims: «La vida está llena de novelas» (144).

Finally, as coincidence would have it, *Nadie* is the reason that the narrator and Álvaro have continued contact. After reading *Nadie*, Alvaro writes the narrator an e-mail which links the metaphor of adoption/orphanhood to the metafictional layer: «Me gustó *Nadie*, me gustó mucho *Nadie*. Todo ese juego entre la realidad y la ficción, la ambigüedad sobre si ella es hija o no de él... Me interesa mucho el asunto de la autoría en la obra de arte, que quizá no sea muy distinto del de la paternidad. ¿Somos hijos de nuestros padres? ¿Somos los autores de nuestras obras...?» (101). In his e-mail Álvaro directly references both layers of the adoption metaphor, leading the narrator to his own conclusion, that perhaps Álvaro is his «nadie», his long-lost son. For the narrator, to be Álvaro's father, is one of those lies «que merecerían ser verdades» (117) indicating an appropriation of Luz's idea of «mientras la contaba era verdad» (70). Álvaro repeats the same comparison of adoption with authorship from his e-mail in his subsequent interview with Luz, specifically referring to his first novel *El parque*. He proclaims that just as he is orphaned, so is his novel: «Hay escritores que creen haber escrito lo que publican... *El*

*parque* es hija mía como yo soy hijo de mis padres» (129). Álvaro finds himself in doubt over the origins of this writing just as he doubts his human origins. Indeed, it is actually Álvaro who leads the narrator to understand the metaphor and to write the novel. The narrator concludes: «Entonces comprendí lo que intentaba decirme acerca de la autoría. Del mismo modo que hay padres adoptivos más legítimos que los verdaderos, hay autores que no se merecen los libros que han escrito» (130). From this understanding, the narrator arrives at an important conclusion that helps him transition from reporter to novelist, a change he has wanted to make since abandoning the adoption report to his interest in «falsos adoptados». The metaphor itself has enabled the narrator to write.

The narrator admits that Luz (Fina) has helped him understand that his failure as fiction writer is a direct result of his attempt to isolate his own reality from his fiction, which he learns is impossible (161). Feeling defenseless when he is confronted with joining the two together, the narrator explains:

Yo siempre había trabajado con materiales reales y sabía de qué manera manipularlos para alcanzar el significado o la dirección que convenía a mis intereses. Mi experiencia con la ficción, en cambio, se reducía a aquel cuento, *Nadie*, en el que incluí por otra parte tantos elementos autobiográficos que en cierto modo era también un reportaje disimulado. No sabía, en fin, de qué manera se defiende uno de lo irreal. (164)

Although his realization concerning fact and fiction comes at the nadir in his well being he learns that fiction is not isolated from reality and that his role as a writer of fiction is to bring the two elements together simultaneously. With this realization he is finally able to write his novel.

The role of the narrator as a writer also brings us to question the role of the author in *Dos mujeres en Praga*. Michel Foucault's article, «What is an Author?» contradicts Roland Barthes' conceptualization of the author's death by maintaining that the concept of author persists in the text as an open space. He concludes: «It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared... we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers» (892). In the open space of the absent author in *Dos mujeres en Praga* the reader discovers a lack of origin, mirroring the case of an orphaned child.

Through an analysis of the metaphor of adoption/orphanhood in *Dos mujeres en Praga* we can deduce that the aesthetic value of the novel itself is in its absent center. In Millás' novel, the space left empty by the disappearance of the author from the center of the text is a dramatization of the separation itself. The author is a birth parent, and while not truly dead, his own life, experiences and perspectives contribute to the *nature* of his child, his novel. The reader adopts the waif and *nurtures* it with his or her own life and experiences. Each reader will have an individualized relationship with this adopted child. Although many critics would have us question the nature of the author, *Dos mujeres en Praga* dramatizes that, as Foucault indicates, he is an absent origin, in the same way that an orphaned child has both a true and absent origin. Derrida's ruptured center coincides with Barthes' dead author, demonstrating that the dilemma of absence in contemporary society is manifested in *Dos mujeres en Praga* on these same two levels, converting Millás novel into a reflection of contemporary society.

The narrator of *Dos mujeres en Praga* joins various genres together into a solid example of truth-questioning postmodern Spanish fiction: the short story *Nadie*, Alvaro's strange epistle to his non-mother, the reports of adoption, Alvaro's interviews with Luz and the narrator's own bringing together of all of these parts. Each of the novel's fragments contributes to the adoption/orphanhood metaphor. At the very end of the novel, the reader bears witness to Luz's request that the narrator be the executor of her meager estate and, in essence, her story, her life<sup>9</sup>. In this way, the narrator's account begins and the novel ends at the same point. This also characterizes the relationship of the author with his fiction: for one brief moment, the novel is his; after its birth he looses it instantaneously in a forced orphanhood, his moment of parenthood already past. Thus, the metaphor of adoption/orphanhood not only unifies textual elements of *Dos mujeres en Praga* but also functions as a metaphor for authorship. Millás has birthed a perfect child, an orphan many readers will happily adopt.

<sup>9</sup> The last words of the novel explain this as the narrator's task. He is left as the executor of Luz's meager estate, but more importantly with the task of telling her story: «La cuestión, en fin, es que me había convertido en el albacea o ejecutor (qué palabras, por cierto) de aquel curiosos testamento que dejaba los escasos bienes de Luz Acaso —el piso de Praga y una cuenta de ahorro— a Álvaro Abril y a María José. Era evidente que para llevar a cabo ese reparto no hacía falta un albacea, pero sí un narrador, un narrado que al contar los últimos días de Luz Acaso tuviera, sin comprender por qué la impresión de ordenar su propia vida».

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